

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JEF-10

150 Soi 20 Sukhumvit Road
Bangkok 11, Thailand
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In Search of a Teak House

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

For almost two years we have been thinking of the idea of building a home in Bangkok by bringing old teak houses in from the countryside and reconstructing them as one. The project is finally making headway, the photograph below being of the first of the houses we shall put up. The reconstruction process is fascinating; we are learning a great deal about Thai architecture through it, and meeting many interesting people as well. Although there is much written on the design of Thai Buddhist temples, there is little on the construction of houses, which seems to be more in the nature of a "folk art" passed on through oral tradition. (The craftsmen we have spoken to, for instance, say you make the walls so many arm-lengths long, etc.) Maybe we will get to write a book on the subject! In any event, we will have a home which won't cost any more than our current rent, and we will be preserving something of value from a past era.



Jeffrey Race is an Institute Fellow studying how the institutions of the past influence people's behavior toward one another today. His current area of interest is Southeast Asia.

This is more than a project to get us a house of our own: we both genuinely appreciate the craftsmanship of earlier generations and want to make it a part of our lives. We also think it's a shame that these old structures are being permitted to run down or are being turned into serving trays, and we believe it important to preserve some of them, somehow. Our passion for the craftsmanship of the past is clearly not shared by the current generation here, however, for beautiful old structures are being torn down every day to make way for "modern" slab buildings. It may well be that a decade or two hence there will be much regret over the current stampede to demolish Thailand's architectural heritage, just as there has been in other countries that have gone through this phase.

Although teak houses differ somewhat from region to region in regard to wall and roof construction and length-to-width ratios, the basic plan is similar: the rooms are raised high above the ground on poles, the roof is decorated with stylized naga (a legendary serpent), and there are large overhangs on all sides. The usual explanation for the pole construction is that it is a necessity for the low-lying plains which are flooded several months of the year. In fact there seems to be something of a cultural imperative to this style, since Thai build their houses on poles even in non-flooding locations, while non-Thai residents, such as the Vietnamese, do not. During the dry season the space is used for parking water buffalo, pigs and chickens, or as extra living and sleeping quarters. The stylized naga are counterparts to the quite lifelike-looking serpents which decorate the roofs of Thai Buddhist temples. The large overhangs keep the mid-day sun off the walls of the house and protect the wood from the tropical rains, which usually fall in heavy vertical sheets. So the construction is a mixture of utility and genuine Thai artistry.

Teak was widely used for these houses because Thailand's forests were full of it, and it is so hard that the endemic termites cannot eat it. It holds up pretty well in the tropical climate, lasting twenty or thirty years if given minimal care, and much longer if properly oiled and protected from the elements. For instance we saw one house that was 95 years old and still in acceptable, or at least restorable, shape. The great beauty of the natural wood has produced a brisk demand for its use in furniture construction. Since the country's teak forests are being felled far more rapidly than they are being replanted, there are now severe restrictions on cutting and shipment of teak wood, in order to prevent illegal logging. Only the government monopoly is permitted to move teak between provinces, the only exception to this, as far as I know, being that old teak houses may be moved, provided they have documents to verify their age. Hence practically no new teak houses are being constructed, except through illegal nighttime felling of the forest by villagers.

Our hunt began seriously last year, when we visited Chiangmai University. Just beyond the university compound a retired government administrator has restored a 200-year old teak house which he found in the province of Tak. Originally belonging to a northern prince, the house is an artistic gem. The restoration is beautiful, as is the setting. On our trip back to Bangkok we visited Tak and viewed some more recent, but still quite attractive, old houses, but we could not seem to find anyone interested in selling.

Quite by coincidence Chumsri mentioned our quest to our dentist one day some months ago, and since then our luck has turned. Dr. Chatuporn suggested that we contact a friend of her brother-in-law, a woodcarver in Chiangmai who travels all through the rural areas of the North buying teak carvings to sell to tourists visiting

Chiengmai. Chum wrote to him and he replied, yes, it's possible to find something but it may take time. Then he wrote again saying he had located some possibilities, and Chum visited Chiengmai alone during March to look at them. Finally we both went together to look at the house Chum had selected, leaving on the night of April 27 and taking the overnight bus to the North.

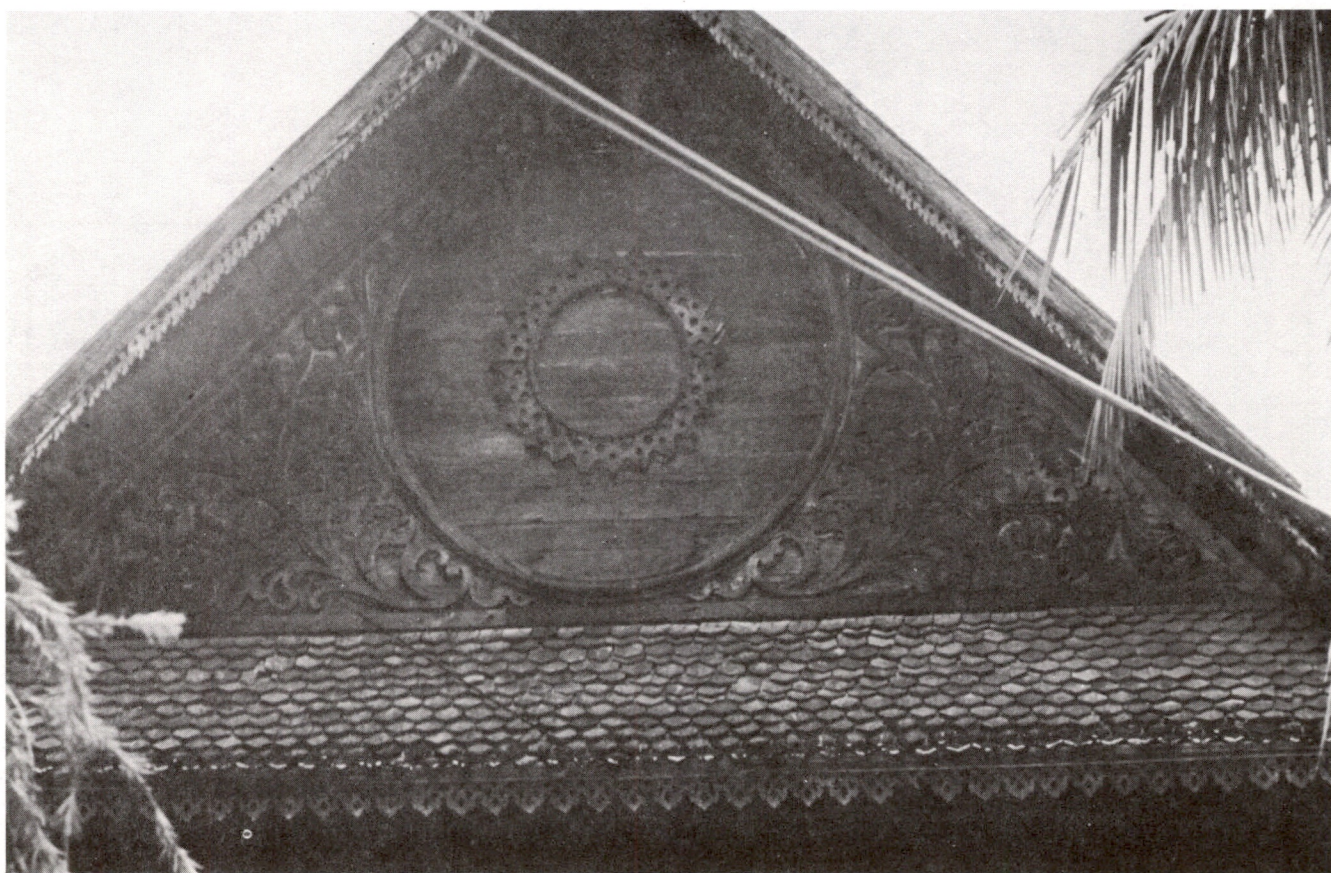
Once we arrived in Chiengmai we visited our woodcarver friend, who was just off on a teak-buying expedition. While we waited for him to return, we visited Sankampaeng, a "suburb" of Chiengmai, where the most ambitious restoration in the North, if not all of Thailand, is under way. The basic structure is an old teak house on a raised platform, but only the poles and some of the doors and windows are being used; the rest was in poor condition and is being recreated by local artisans following the old patterns. When completed it will be used as a tourist center and sales office, presumably for northern-style handicrafts, for which Sankampaeng is well known. I took the photo shown below, which illustrates the northern-style stylized naga (different from that of the Central Plain) and the "gingerbread" carvings under the wide overhang. Chum is on the right. To my right, as I am standing taking the picture, is another structure like the ones shown, and behind me are the stairs leading up from the ground, covered by an elaborately carved roof. The entire platform is about 8 feet above ground and is bordered at the edges by an intricate railing. The architect fortunately was present when we stopped by, and he took time off from his work to show us around, discuss the plans, and answer all of our questions in full detail. He has plans for several more structures when this one is completed, but this much has taken a year already.



We next visited another interesting house on the banks of the Ping River, which flows through the center of Chiangmai. The photo below again illustrates the naga, the large overhangs, and the pole construction. On the far right you can also see the small tiled roof over the stairs up to the platform. Although not visible here, immediately beyond the house is the river, which the house overlooks. This northern-style house has a straight roof going up to the peak, while houses in the central style (such as ours shown on the first page) have concave roofs. I cannot explain the reason for the latter form of construction, which takes much more time and attention to detail. Also, traditional northern-style houses have either strictly vertical walls (like this one), or outward-sloping walls (like the Sankampaeng house, although it is not clear in the photo), while central-style houses have inward-sloping walls.

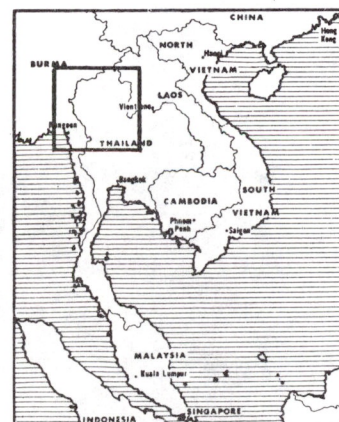
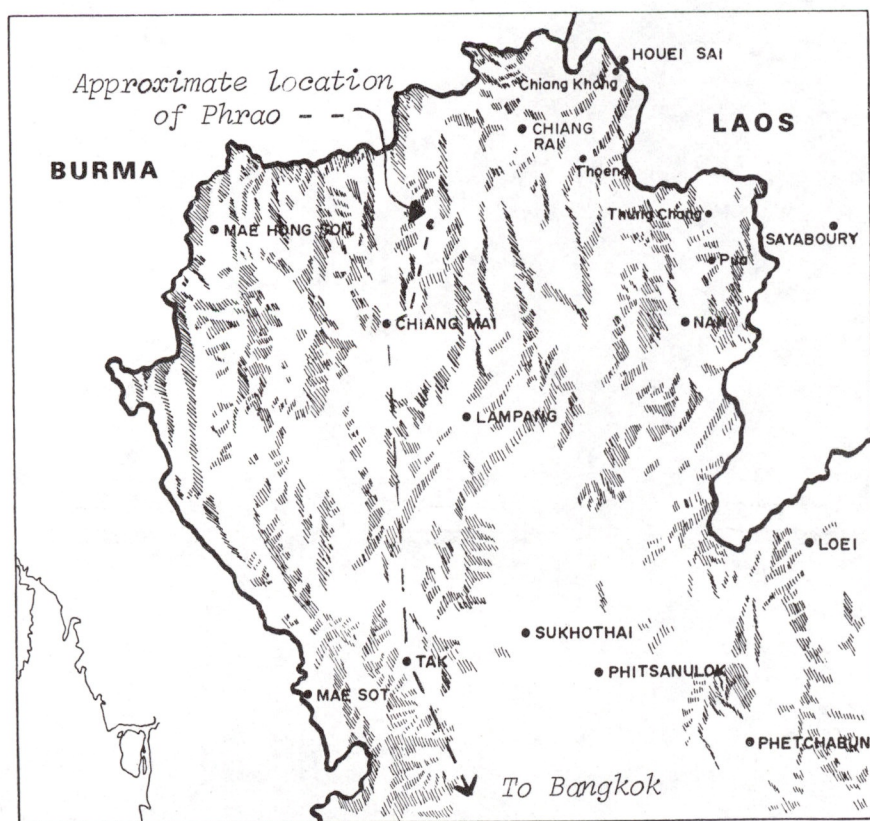


Our next stop was the northern residence of Phinit Sombatsiri (more on him later), which is much more in the rural style, being constructed with wood from old barns. He is very proud of it, as well he might be. Because of his faithfulness to detail, though, the contractor refuses to build any more houses for him! Unfortunately I could not get a picture of this house, but I did get one of the detail work under the overhang of another Thai house right in the center of the city. You can also see the "gingerbread" characteristic of this style. (Photo on next page.)



Monday morning we were up bright and early to begin our trip. Our friend and guide had suggested this not because the road is so long, but because it is so bad! We wanted to get back the same day, and even with this precaution, we just barely made it. Our destination was Phrao, a district town 65 miles by road north of Chiangmai, and about 25 miles as the crow flies from the Burmese border. (The map on the next page shows our itinerary.) We travelled in a 4-wheel drive jeep, which was great for the mud puddles and bogs, but terrible for keeping the choking red dust off.

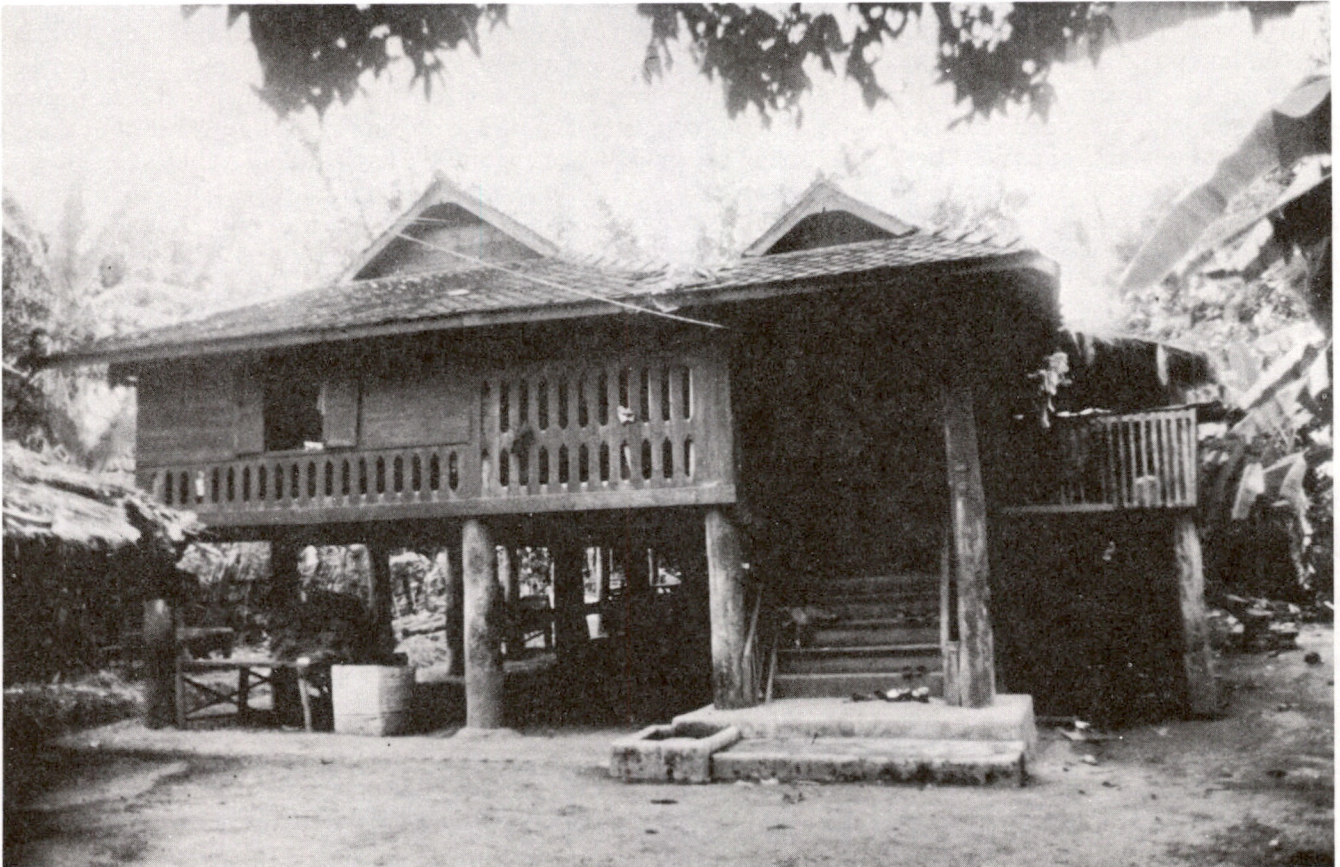
The first fifteen miles or so were quite pleasant, as the road was hard surface, and there was not much traffic. Along the entire distance the scenery was most enjoyable (mountains and jungles, as opposed to monotonous rice fields in the Central Plain), but as we left "civilization" the condition of the road deteriorated exponentially. It soon became a laterite road, still wide, and then a narrow bumpy dirt road all the way to Phrao, where the main street once again became macadam. The first bridges out of Chiangmai and the suburb of San Sai were concrete, but these later changed to wood, railroad-tie style. In time the construction became even more primitive, shifting to rough-hewn logs exactly as wide as the wheels of our jeep. Enormous logging trucks and 60-passenger busses travel this route, but we never did see one cross such a bridge, and I would not enjoy being a passenger on such a crossing.



As the map indicates, Phrao lies in a remote upland valley. The villagers seem fairly prosperous here, since this is an important tobacco and soybean growing area, but the isolation weighed on us as we moved further and further out on the narrow road. In another year we may not have that feeling, for the entire stretch is to be made over into a hard-surface all-weather highway, and the construction crews were already beginning the basic work as we made our way north.

We arrived in Phrao around noon and stopped for lunch and a quick wash-up to get the dust off, and then went off to look at the house, which is just a couple of miles out of town. It was built by an older couple about a decade ago from teak which they and their family cut in the nearby forest, but they now want to build a more "modern" house with the money from selling this one. Even so, as you can see from the photo on the next page, this structure was not put together according to the older model, but is simplified a great deal and looks almost contemporary in many ways. We plan to use only the wood and the poles (the teak being unavailable otherwise, as noted earlier), and to redesign the house completely along more traditional lines.

The size of the house as it stands now is 33 feet by 48 feet, supported by 40 poles each 14 inches in diameter. Just inside the door facing you in the photo is a large open living room and then two enclosed bedrooms. Then, in the back, there is a "kitchen" which runs the whole width of the house, with a roof of its own. As it stands it is too dark inside (a problem with all Thai houses), and when we redesign it we will open it up considerably to let the natural light in. The house will take only two days to pull apart, and we will ship it to Bangkok in three truckloads. We estimate it weighs about 40 tons.



The problem with the house in Phrao is that it will take time to redesign and reconstruct before we can live in it. Since we are trying to schedule this project so it does not interfere with our other commitments, we decided to look for something smaller and simpler which we could put up quickly pretty much "as is" and move right into. You see the result of our search on the first page of this letter.

It was Chum who had the inspiration which led to our finding this house. She thought, logically enough, that we should get in touch with the "experts" on this subject, so we called the government's Fine Arts Department and were put on the phone with the Mr. Phinit mentioned earlier. He was enthusiastic about our project, said he had a Thai house himself, and invited us to come over to see it one Sunday morning.

I did not realize it at the time but I had actually visited his home previously, on a house tour in 1970 during an earlier stay in Bangkok. The house and compound are one of the best-known in town, covering about 15 acres just behind the British Embassy off Ploenchit Road. Regrettably I do not have photographs of the house, which is of very unusual design, in fact with a Burmese style roof. The only other example of this in Thailand, as far as I know, is an actual Burmese temple in the town of Ngao near Chiangmai. The house was built more than half a century ago by Phinit's father-in-law. Then it was countryside -- now it is one of the major business and residential areas of Bangkok.

Phinit showed us around a small guest house floating in a pond, which he had rebuilt from a pharmacy originally located in the famous old capital of Ayuthaya. This was the kind of thing we were looking for, so he suggested we find out whether a house were still available which the Fine Arts Department itself had been interested in buying the previous year. This was a fine specimen of the rural architecture of the Central Plain, he assured us, and it had originally been planned to reconstruct it inside the Fine Arts Department compound just across the street from the Grand Palace. Bureaucratic problems had caused the project to fall through, but he encouraged us to travel to the scene to see whether it had yet been sold. The following weekend he sent his driver with us as a guide.

Our destination was a district of Suphanburi province about 110 miles northwest of Bangkok (see map below). We first drove north on the main highway out of Bangkok,



then turned west and drove past Ayuthaya and the next major city, Angthong. From here on the road deteriorates, until finally, as you approach Suphanburi, it becomes red dirt, or more often, dust. We then drove another 25 miles from the province capital to the district town of Don Chedi, named after a famous Buddhist shrine located directly in the center of town. The shrine commemorates the occasion, four centuries ago, when King Naresuan defeated the Burmese king in battle at this location, freeing Thailand from Burmese control. The road to Don Chedi was hard surface, but as we swung east from the center of town, it became dirt again, and as we turned into another temple compound about five miles further on, the road shrivelled to a narrow track just wide enough for one vehicle to pass. This continued on for several more miles through rice fields

and copses of trees, indeed a most attractive sight. Most of Thailand at this time (about a month ago) was dry and dusty after months without rain, but here the fields were full of rice. The price is so good this year (due both to high world demand and to a reduction in the export tax) that the local farmers have been pumping water for months from the nearby river in order to get a second crop.

It was our good fortune that the house still stood where it had a year before -- no one else, it seemed, had yet wanted to have a genuine old Thai teak house, and the owner was pleased to find someone who would take good care of it at its new location. The house was built 35 years ago, we determined, when the owner's sister (now age 35) told us it had been built the year she was born. It's all teak except for the poles and floors, and the walls are intricately carved panels which fit together without nails. In fact, there were no nails used in the construction of the whole house; it fits together with dowels and can be taken apart in one day. It will probably take a week to put back up, since we will modernize a bit and also try to put some right angles in where they aren't now. The floors are wild mango wood, planks one inch thick and 14 inches wide, which take a much better shine than teak.

We have since been out to Don Chedi several more times on weekends to take measurements, to look at other houses, to talk with the neighbors. They speak a different dialect there -- different even from the dialect in the province capital only 25 miles away. It has been a test of my Thai-speaking ability, and a lot of fun besides. We are both happy too to have the chance to meet these people who have meaning-

ful lives of their own, but whom we would never run across in Bangkok. An example of how this kind of barrier typically divides people here: we are going to have the village carpenter accompany the house to Bangkok and reconstruct it for us (his father is the one who built it originally). We thought to have him sit in the truck and escort the house, but he said that would not be enough, even with the proper documents: the police would stop him at every checkpoint on the way to Bangkok, and when they found he could not speak the Bangkok dialect, they would demand bribes to permit him to pass. So Chumsri will have to sit with him. Since she is a government official, who speaks the Bangkok dialect, there will be no problem of demands for gratuities. We were told much the same thing when talking with the people in Phrao.

One of the advantages for us of a house like this is that we can put it together stage-by-stage, as our circumstances and needs require. On the next two pages I am drawing the plan as we see it now. First we will put up this house, having essentially one 18 foot by 10 foot room as a combination living room, dining room, bedroom and office. There is a seven-foot wide porch which we will enclose, so we will have an elevated, protected outside area too. Temporarily we will put a kitchen downstairs. Then, when we find another house that matches or nearly matches this one in dimensions, we will put it up porch-to-porch with this one, giving us another upstairs room, and more space downstairs if we choose to enclose it. The next stage will then be to construct a third concave roof over the two porches, giving us a big center room, about 15 by 25 feet. It will look even larger inside because the ceilings are open all the way up to the tile roof, 15 feet high at the peak. Finally, we will bring the house down from the North and reconstruct it with a living room and dining room upstairs, and a large open area, all connected by an elevated walkway to what we are building now, which will be our bedroom and study.

Fortunately Bangkok is a city of friends and relatives. With two architects and one electrical engineer in the family, we have gotten the best advice available in town, free or otherwise. A close friend of Chum's, also an architect, drove all the way across town and spent a whole night with us some time back to get us started on our construction plan. The construction company is enthusiastic about the project and is doing it on a no-profit basis between big jobs. And a horticulturist friend whose expertise is roses has promised to create a big rose garden for us when we are ready. But we are moving slowly and carefully, a step at a time, as this is new to all of us. No one builds houses like this any more.

In another newsletter I want to tell you a bit about the place where we are building the house: on the Rangsit Canal, north of Bangkok, still largely a rural area. All of our neighbors still grow rice, and there are water buffalo grazing every day in the next field. We have been going out to the land for some time now, and we are becoming members of the community. It's quite an experience, pleasant in many ways, not so in others, particularly for someone used to the anonymity of city life and the norm of privacy which tends to develop in such an environment. To some extent we will be living in a goldfish bowl. But if they can see in, we can see out. More on this later.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey Race

Received in New York June 24, 1974

PLAN FOR DO-IT-YOURSELF-IN-YOUR-SPA

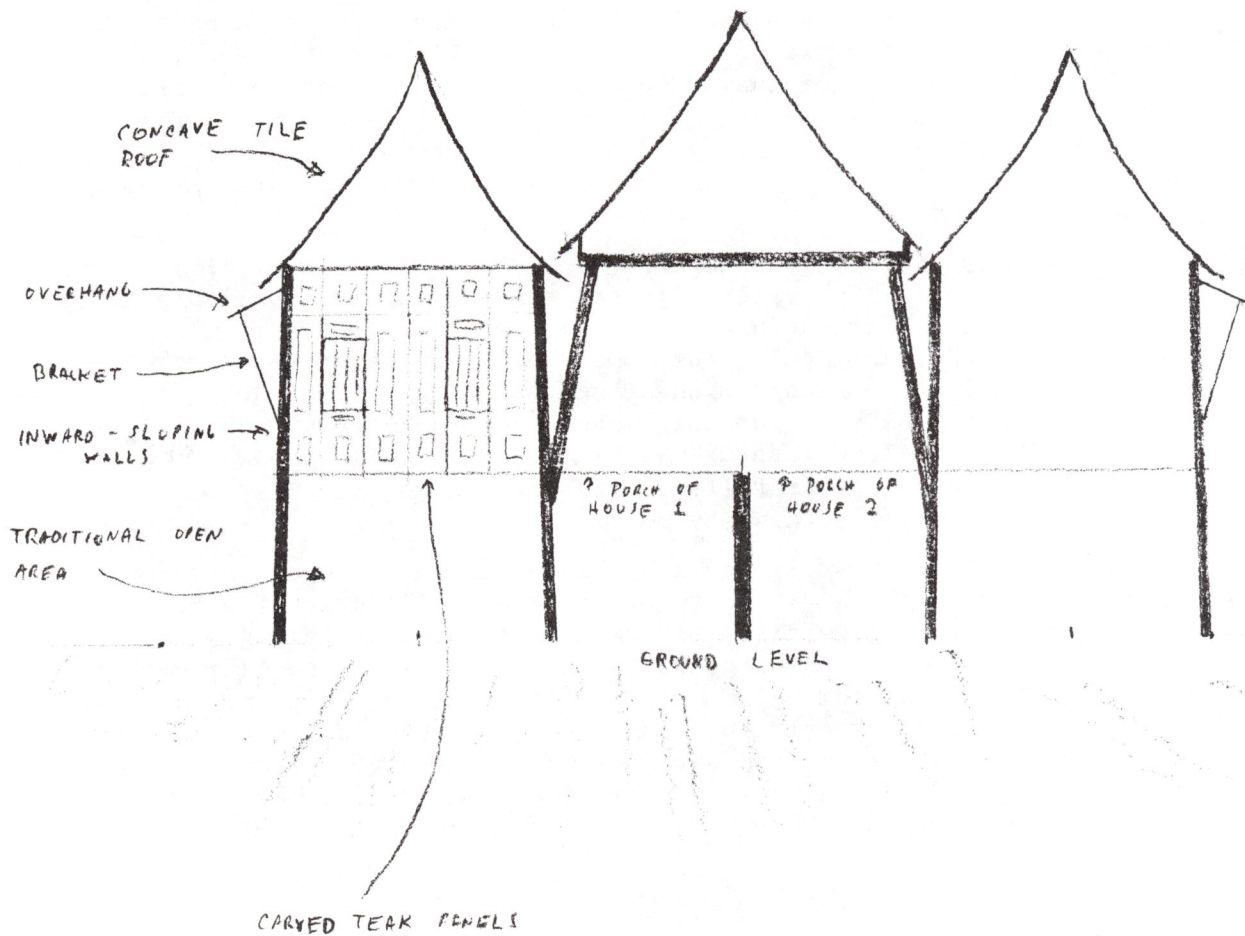
STAGE ONE
A SMALL HOUSE



STAGE THREE
A THIRD ROOF
OVER PORCHES



STAGE TWO
A SMALL HOUSE

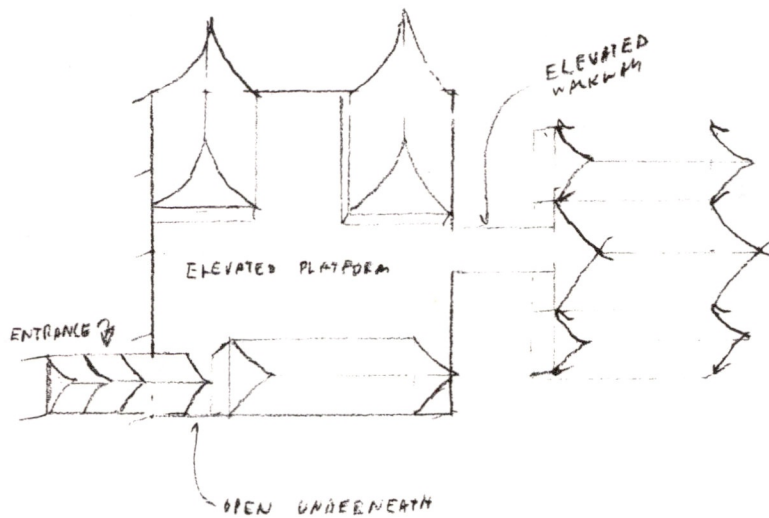


SIDE VIEW

RE-TIME TEAK HOUSE

STAGE FOUR
ADD ANOTHER BUILDING

THIS IS THE
STRUCTURE AT LEFT



TOP VIEW